A Roundtable Discussion of How to Deal with Student Excuses as Business Faculty

**Abstract**

An inevitable, yet relatable, experience as a professor is being exposed to a variety of excuses from students about why they are unable to complete activities related to the course (e.g., attending class, completing an assignment, etc.). Figuring out how to respond to these excuses can be tiring, time-consuming, and frustrating, but we believe there are productive ways to do so. In this roundtable, we will have an interactive discussion of excuses that we and attendees have experienced, with particular attention paid to how student excuses have evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic. We will then provide a space where we can collectively develop proactive strategies for dealing with student excuses in empathetic and equitable ways.

**Keywords**

Student Excuses, Empathy, Equity, COVID-19 Pandemic

**Introduction**

         As professors, we are constantly faced with excuses from students about why they cannot come to class, why they need extensions, why they missed a test, etc. Dealing with these excuses can feel exhausting and can distract our attention from more important teaching-related activities. Moreover, it can be especially frustrating to receive excuses from business students knowing that excuses such as these will likely fall on deaf ears after entering the professional workplace. This is a concern since, as business educators, we feel a duty to prepare our students to be responsible and engaged employees.

We began to take particular notice of the extent and types of excuses in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. How do we sort out the legitimate ones made by students who could really benefit from empathy and extra help during this time? How do we address students in a way that ensures equity across the class? Additionally, the online environment can make judging the veracity of these excuses more difficult in the absence of face-to-face interaction, where we may not get to know our students outside of a black box on Zoom. The nature of excuses has also evolved such that students appear to be facing more conflict in the direction of homelife to school: being distracted by activities taking place in their homes, poor internet connections, work-related emergencies, increases in work and course loads, and well-being of other family members. We believe it is important to find a way to address such excuses, but this is a difficult task. Therefore, in this roundtable, we intend to create a space to share our experiences as professors in dealing with excuses in the current environment, as well as brainstorm ways to proactively, empathetically, and equitably address these excuses.

**Theoretical Foundations/Teaching Implications**

         We define an excuse as a reason that students give as to why they are unable to complete a component of a course on time or at all. The timing of the excuse may occur proactively (i.e., before the missed course component) or reactively (i.e., after the deadline has passed). The current literature on student excuses is scant, but what does exist (e.g., Song, 2013; Ferrari & Beck, 1998; Abernethy and Padgett, 2010) is dated to pre-COVID-19 times, concentrating especially on in-person class attendance, and dealing more with the nature of the excuses themselves rather than the best way(s) for professors to deal with them.

Abernethy and Padgett (2010) identified two extremes in handling students' excuses: at one extreme, students would be allowed to miss any assignment, as long as they can make up for it before the end of semester. At the other extreme, students would not be allowed to miss any assignments, beyond what is allowed by the university or college policies. These preferences likely stem from the tendency of fraudulent excuses. In particular, Roig and Caso (2005) found that the majority of college students in their sample (72%) claimed a fraudulent excuse.

We argue that COVID-19 related disruptions increase the relevance of student excuses on business school faculty’s pedagogical approach. COVID-19 is shown to impact students’ mental health (Zhai and Du, 2020), decrease students’ confidence and preparedness (Choi et al., 2020), and create personal hardships (Aristeideu and Cross, 2020), all of which would likely result in an increase in student excuses (fraudulent or not) in classroom settings. Therefore, best practices for handling student excuses have become even more relevant in post-COVID-19 times, necessitating proactive and empathetic strategies from business faculty.

While not the primary focus of this session, we developed a survey that collects data on business school instructors’ experiences with student excuses. The survey is designed to collect responses anonymously. Our initial results suggest that there has been an increase in student excuses with the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating the timeliness of this session. Interestingly, none of the student excuses mentioned in the survey by instructors were related to health or well-being. In terms of handling the student excuses, most instructors stated that they have been more accepting, regardless of how “absurd” the excuses are, yet there was a lack of consensus in specific strategies for dealing with them. These data point to how universal the experience is of increased and evolving student excuses during the pandemic, and also the necessity to have more formal conversations among professors about approaches to these excuses.

**Session Description**

         As a roundtable, this will be a 60-minute session. We will spend the first 5 minutes welcoming attendees and introducing ourselves as the presenters. Second, we will have a (what we expect to be lively) discussion of what excuses attendees have experienced through their careers as well as how these excuses have evolved in light of the pandemic. Next, we will briefly present a variety of student excuses that we gathered in a survey of business school professors. We will then break into small groups to discuss our approaches to dealing with student excuses as professors, and finally close by regrouping and identifying best practices discussed in small groups.

We plan to use the following specific timetable:

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| **Activity** | **Duration** |
| Welcome & introduction | 5 minutes |
| Sharing of attendees’ “best” student excuses | 10 minutes |
| Brief presentation of survey results | 10 minutes |
| Small group discussions | 25 minutes |
| Regroup & conclusion | 10 minutes |
| **TOTAL** | **60 minutes** |

**References**

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